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## Insurgent Defectors in Counterinsurgencies

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Jacqueline L. Hazelton

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**ABSTRACT:** This article identifies the value of insurgent defectors fighting within counterinsurgencies to offset weaknesses within the effort and to act as a force multiplier, as long as the counterinsurgent meets defectors' shared interests with the government.

With internal conflict comes the question of what to do with insurgent defectors. In Afghanistan, international actors and the Afghan government have been intermittently attempting to reconcile with, or rehabilitate, members of the insurgency. These efforts have included incorporating defectors into the security forces.<sup>1</sup> In Iraq, the government faces major questions about how to handle Sunnis who fought for the Islamic State and then changed sides. In Syria, the alignments and realignments of state and nonstate actors have been dizzying.

As the United States continues supporting other weak, failed, and unstable states, the question of how to use defectors to achieve operational goals remains prominent. Furthermore, as the international community continues efforts to end internal conflicts and integrate insurgent fighters into national armies, larger questions about assuring peace after conflict also arise.<sup>2</sup>

This article analyzes the conditions in which counterinsurgencies have most effectively used guerrilla defectors in their fighting forces. Systematic analysis of the Algerian War (1954–62), the insurgency in Oman (1965–76), the Rhodesian Bush War (1964–79), the civil war in El Salvador (1979–92), and US operations in Iraq (2003–present) provide variations in operational and strategic outcomes, types of counterinsurgencies and insurgencies, and historical contexts to identify lessons applicable to other campaigns. The lessons learned emphasize the importance of using defectors for their unique skills and for assuring a long-term, post-conflict alignment of political interests between defectors and counterinsurgents.

The exploitation of defectors lends support to the argument that counterinsurgency is essentially a political struggle, rather than strictly a military one, and thus political measures taken by counterinsurgents

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1 A number of Taliban defectors have been integrated into local security forces in the Afghan Local Police program, for example, but remain in their own communities. Kevin Baron, "Reintegrated Taliban Fighters Allowed To Join Local Police Units," *Stars and Stripes*, January 4, 2011.

2 Ronald R. Krebs and Roy Licklider, "United They Fall: Why the International Community Should Not Promote Military Integration after Civil War," *International Security* 40, no. 3 (Winter 2015/2016): 93–138, doi:10.1162/ISEC\_a\_00228.

strongly influence who wins and who loses.<sup>3</sup> A counterinsurgent's ability to attract elements of the insurgency suggests a broader ability to make choices that will weaken the political and military challenges posed by insurgents. Conversely, a counterinsurgency unable, or unwilling, to provide political accommodations to gain the cooperation of those it has fought against is unlikely to have the political capabilities necessary to defeat the insurgency.

Attempts to draw insurgents away from their causes are common in counterinsurgency campaigns. Discussions of the use of defectors, such as in pseudo gangs that infiltrate an insurgency, do appear in existing work on counterinsurgency.<sup>4</sup> Using them as fighters is apparently less common, but there is little research available on this aspect of counterinsurgency.<sup>5</sup> The use of defectors as fighters does not necessarily win wars, but under certain conditions it can advance political and military counterinsurgency goals because defectors can act as force multipliers. Many other questions about defectors are not addressed here, but are worthy of investigation.

### Advancing Counterinsurgent Goals

Counterinsurgencies can reap substantial benefits by using defectors as fighters to overcome innate areas of weakness such as local knowledge and irregular fighting ability.<sup>6</sup> Defectors can provide operational and strategic information on the insurgency's leadership, members, operations, communications, caches, and support systems; the civilian population, leaders, and groups including their languages, cultures, interests, demands, and frustrations; as well as other conditions such as terrain and weather. Defectors can provide irregular warfare skills to conventionally trained armies and to armies whose primary role has been regime protection rather than fighting ability.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, defectors can, on behalf of counterinsurgents, exchange information with other actors in the conflict, the insurgency, and the populace. Troops from other areas of the country or foreign forces may not have this ability. Many, if not all, insurgencies conduct a degree of irregular warfare, which equips insurgents with greater irregular warfighting skills than the average soldier in a conventional army.

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3 Sir Robert Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency: Experiences from Malaya and Vietnam* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1966); David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1964, 2006); and United States Department of the Army, *The U.S. Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual: U.S. Army Field Manual no. 3-24: Marine Corps Warfighting Publication no. 3-33.5* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

4 Stephen T. Hosmer and Sibylle O. Crane, *Counterinsurgency: A Symposium, April 16–20, 1962* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 1962); the work of Frank Kitson; Ian F. W. Beckett, "The Rhodesian Army: Counter-Insurgency, 1972–1979," part 2, Selous Scouts, September 16, 2007, [http://selousscouts.tripod.com/rhodesian%20army%20coin%2072\\_79%20part2.htm](http://selousscouts.tripod.com/rhodesian%20army%20coin%2072_79%20part2.htm); Lawrence E. Cline, *Pseudo Operations and Counterinsurgency: Lessons From Other Countries* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2005); and Robert M. Cassidy, "The Long Small War: Indigenous Forces for Counterinsurgency," *Parameters* 36, no. 2 (Summer 2006): 47–62.

5 Valuable literature on militias as state proxies is developing, but it does not focus on defectors.

6 For more on the degree to which states can understand communities within their borders, see James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998). The Department of Defense (DoD) defines irregular warfare as "a violent struggle among state and nonstate actors for legitimacy and influence over the relevant populations. IW favors indirect and asymmetric approaches, though it may employ the full range of military and other capabilities, in order to erode an adversary's power, influence, and will." DoD, *Irregular Warfare (IW), Joint Operating Concept (JOC), Version 1.0* (Washington: DoD, 2007).

7 Caitlin Talmadge, *The Dictator's Army: Battlefield Effectiveness in Authoritarian Regimes* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015).

Counterinsurgencies that take advantage of an insurgent's unique skill set are likely to benefit more than those that merge insurgents into regular forces. Effective use of defectors' knowledge and irregular fighting abilities requires matching their unit assignments with their unique skills and giving them a voice in designing operations they will participate in, which also takes advantage of their high levels of self-confidence. This factor ties into the need to work according to the interests of the defectors and the counterinsurgency. Research finds an increased sense of agency plays a role in individual decisions to become an insurgent.<sup>8</sup> Logically, ex-insurgents would want to retain that sense of controlling their own destiny in their new roles. Their local knowledge probably means they have greater insight into the likely political effects of counterinsurgent choices than government or intervening forces.

Acceptance and cooperation from regular forces is another factor that contributes to the successful use of defectors. If conventional forces refuse to cooperate with defectors' efforts, the defectors' presence and actions are not force multipliers but sources of division and resentment within the counterinsurgent force. Defector units must also be consistently trained and supported to do what they do best, which is typically small-unit operations such as ambushing, tracking, and intelligence collection.

For defectors to remain on the counterinsurgency's side, they must identify their own interests with the counterinsurgency's success and believe their benefits will continue beyond the conflict's end. Such interests may range from revenge or personal gain to a desire to be on the winning side. Any individual defector's interests are likely to include a variety of short- and long-term motivations comprised under the rubric of identifying with the goal of counterinsurgent success. Defectors are more likely to remain with the counterinsurgency if they left the insurgency because their interests began to align more closely to those of the counterinsurgency than defectors motivated by weariness, fear, or financial gain. This tendency occurs because insurgents, in taking up arms, reveal their focus on the future and their belief in their ability to shape it.<sup>9</sup>

## Research Design

The cases examined here were drawn from counterinsurgency campaigns in which a great power backed a client threatened by an insurgency. Also for policy relevance, these cases include various degrees of great power intervention, from occupation by tens of thousands of combat troops to a small footprint of military advisors. All cases involve an insurgency fueled at least in part by nationalism.

Some may argue wars for national liberation are an artifact of the post-World War II breakdown of the colonial order, and thus have limited relevance in the postcolonial world. However, contemporary cases of resistance to occupation are similar to anticolonial wars in the desire of the insurgents, and their civilian supporters, to reduce

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8 Scott, *Seeing Like a State*; DoD, *Irregular Warfare*; and Talmadge, *Dictator's Army*.

9 This focus on the long-term alignment of interests between counterinsurgent and defector is similar to advice for all sorts of alliances and long-term partnerships, from marriages to business arrangements to military interactions with other types of actors.

the influence of the great power backing their government.<sup>10</sup> Finally, cases of counterinsurgency success and failure assist in determining whether the variables important for the effective use of defectors differ according to campaign outcomes.<sup>11</sup> These variables are, first, how the counterinsurgency uses defectors as fighters, and second, to what degree the counterinsurgency assures defectors' interests. Defectors who use their unique skills and who expect postwar benefits from counterinsurgent success are likely to be more effective in advancing the counterinsurgency's effort.

*Algerian War: Counterinsurgency failure.* During the revolutionary war for national liberation, Algerian insurgents drove the French from power in what France considered its territory. The insurgents sought equal rights with and eventually gained independence from the French.

*Insurgency in Oman: Counterinsurgency success.* The Sultan of Oman and his British backers countered a broad-based nationalist and Marxist insurgency in Dhofar, Oman's southernmost region. Insurgents seeking greater independence from Britain, and a social and political revolution, were decisively defeated in the military campaign.

*Rhodesian Bush War: Counterinsurgency failure.* Black nationalist insurgents defeated the minority white government in the former British colony now known as Zimbabwe.

*El Salvador's civil war: Counterinsurgency success.* A broad-based revolutionary insurgency fought to end US domination of the state and the region and to end military rule. The US-backed incumbent government remained in power after the peace agreement, but the military was no longer in control.

*US operations in Iraq: Continuing counterinsurgency.* After the United States invaded Iraq in 2003, it toppled the government. Broad-based insurgencies have fought the US occupation, Sunnis and Shiites waged civil war, and terrorist groups, such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, battled for power.

## Analysis

### *Special Skills*

Evidence from the civil war in El Salvador and US operations in Iraq shows the most value is gained when defectors' strengths offset a counterinsurgency's weakness. The evidence from Rhodesia indicates a lack of attention to defector units' strengths and weaknesses can have political costs for the counterinsurgency. To take advantage of unique skills—such as intelligence and irregular fighting ability as well as knowledge of the terrain, languages, cultures, population, and insurgency—counterinsurgents conduct a full assessment of the situation to take advantage of unique skills, such as intelligence, irregular fighting

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<sup>10</sup> Robert A. Pape, *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism* (New York: Random House, 2005).

<sup>11</sup> Steven Van Evera, *Guide to Methods for Students of Political Science* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 21–27.

ability. If the conflict involves ethnicity, for example, coethnic defectors are more likely to be effective than cross-ethnic ones.<sup>12</sup>

In Dhofar, the Sultan's Armed Forces (SAF) exploited the fighting ability of the *firqats*, or militias, formed around defectors with tribal connections and local knowledge. The *firqats* knew the ground and guerrilla tactics; they were good at what the British officers and the other troops, from such locations as Northern Oman and Pakistan, were bad at—including reconnaissance, speed of maneuver, and recognizing trails and individuals in the mountains, where the insurgency was strongest. The *firqats* were also better at intelligence collection and, unsurprisingly, at communicating with other Dhofaris.<sup>13</sup> Lacking military discipline, the *firqats* patrolled and ambushed in small groups, and held tribal territory that had been taken in conventional joint operations with the Sultan's Armed Forces.<sup>14</sup> The *firqats* were reliable skirmishers against small numbers of insurgents. But their lack of discipline and refusal to conduct operations were not of direct benefit to their exasperated regular SAF officers.<sup>15</sup>

The *firqats* were a force multiplier by virtue of the ethnicity they shared with much of the mountain population: the counterinsurgency's use of the coethnic force in these regions was less likely to spark resistance than punitive operations conducted by non-Dhofari troops. Brigadier John Graham ordered the Dhofar Brigade to continue punishing Dhofaris who helped the enemy, using the *firqats* whenever possible.<sup>16</sup> The *firqats* also made the Sultan's counterinsurgent force look less like an army of occupation. The insurgents reportedly considered one *firqat* a greater danger than 10 of the Sultan's regular troops.<sup>17</sup>

The *firqats* were a rich source of information.<sup>18</sup> During Operation Husn, the Omani force used *firqats* to identify individuals trying to leave the area.<sup>19</sup> The defectors were also able to identify insurgent leaders and supporters, round them up, and encourage them to repudiate the insurgency publicly.<sup>20</sup> The *firqats* made it possible for the counterinsurgency to clear insurgents out of the valleys of eastern and central Dhofar at relatively low cost. Searching the deep, jungled, cave-riddled depths required examining every square yard for insurgent arms

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12 Jason Lyall, "Are Coethnics More Effective Counterinsurgents? Evidence from the Second Chechen War," *American Political Science Review* 104, no. 1 (February 2010): 1–20, doi:10.1017/S0003055409990323.

13 Ian Gardiner, *In the Service of the Sultan: A First Hand Account of the Dhofar Insurgency* (Barnsley, South Yorkshire: Pen and Sword Military, 2007), 159; Tony Jeapes, *SAS: Operation Oman* (London: William Kimber, 1983), 231; and John Akehurst, *We Won a War: The Campaign in Oman 1965–1975* (Wilton, UK: Michael Russell, 1982), 96.

14 Jeapes, *SAS*, 123.

15 MG Tony Jeapes, (former commander of 22nd Special Air Regiment during the Dhofar Rebellion), interview with author, May 15, 2009; and Gardiner, *Service of the Sultan*, 157.

16 Directive for Commander Dhofar for 1972 Update, March 3, 1972, John Graham Collection, Oman Archive (OA), GB165-0327, Box 2, Folder 3, Middle East Center (MEC), St. Antony's College (SAC), Oxford University, UK.

17 Operation Storm Fortnightly Report, May 5, 1971, Graham, OA, GB165-0327, Box 2, Folder 5, MEC, SAC, Oxford.

18 Interview recording, Brigadier John Bryan Akehurst (commander, Dhofar Brigade, 1974–1976), October 14, 1992, catalog number 11156, reel 2, Imperial War Museum (IWM); and Jeapes, interview.

19 Ops/2 Confirmatory Notes: Operation Husn, April 7, 1975, Edward Ashley Collection, OA, GB165-0399, Box 2, Folder 2/3, MEC, SAC, Oxford.

20 Jeapes, *SAS*, 64–65.

and supply caches. The Sultan's troops stayed in the heights while the firqats and their Special Air Service (SAS) advisors cleared the valleys. The firqats' demeanor indicated how dangerous each area was. The firqats also talked with the populace and returned with the location of caches. Blind searching in the valleys was a wasted effort.<sup>21</sup>

In El Salvador, US advisors experimented with the use of defectors' skills in the field. Some of the success of defector units in El Salvador was due to support by experienced, individual US Special Forces advisors who had worked with other non-US troops and in other conflicts involving irregular warfare.<sup>22</sup> In one area, defectors were used in a role similar to that of a pseudo gang, but they did not masquerade. The defectors, led by a former insurgent platoon leader, made up the most successful unit in the 5th Brigade Zone in 1985–86, which once accounted for the majority of kills in the entire brigade. The unit walked into insurgent bases and killed or captured everyone present, with Salvadoran special forces support.<sup>23</sup>

US advisors in El Salvador also used defectors to identify other insurgents. In the 4th Brigade Zone in 1989–90, US advisors made a practice of hiding a defector inside a truck with a hole cut in the canvas so he could see the villagers who lined up to accept rice, oil, beans, and other foodstuffs delivered in civic action projects. Anyone the defector identified could either be quietly picked up outside town or followed in hopes of finding an insurgent camp.<sup>24</sup> Defectors also provided the insurgency's communications codes, a great prize given the insurgency's highly effective operational security.<sup>25</sup>

During US operations in Iraq, tribal forces in Anbar turned against al-Qaeda to side with the US military and joined the Iraqi army and police while conducting their own operations to raid insurgent caches and safe houses.<sup>26</sup> These independent operations benefited the counterinsurgency at relatively little cost.

In contrast, the Rhodesian counterinsurgents learned the costs of using defector units, such as the Selous Scouts, for operations that played only to their tactical strengths. The Scouts served not only as pseudo gangs but also as trackers, guides, and hunter-killer teams.<sup>27</sup> These defectors significantly increased the intelligence the counterinsurgency received through their long-range reconnaissance and surveillance

21 Jeapes, interview.

22 MG Mark Hamilton (USA Retired) (US military group leader in San Salvador during peace talks), interview with author, April 13, 2010.

23 COL Francisco Pedrozo (USA Retired) (trained first group of Salvadoran cadets at Fort Benning, GA, in 1982; military advisor in San Vicente 1985–86; and training officer, operations advisor, deputy commander of the U.S. military group in San Salvador 1989–92), email messages to author, April 4, 2010. US-advised forces in the Philippines used similar ruses against the Huks.

24 MG Simeon Trombitas (USA Retired) (senior advisor/chief of operations, planning and training with the 4th Infantry Brigade in Chalatenango, El Salvador, 1989–90), email message to author, April 4, 2010.

25 CSM Henry Ramirez (USA Retired) (trainer of Salvadoran forces in Panama in 1982, including the first long range reconnaissance patrol unit in 1982–83, and a military advisor in Chalatenango 1987–88), interview with author, May 17, 2010.

26 MAJ Niel Smith and COL Sean MacFarland, "Anbar Awakens: The Tipping Point," *Military Review* 88, no. 2 (March–April 2008): 41–52; and, Akehurst, catalog number 11156, reel 2, IWM.

27 Beckett, "Rhodesian Army."

missions. One study credits the Scouts with 68 percent of all insurgent kills inside Rhodesia.<sup>28</sup>

However, these defectors also pushed operations into neighboring states, including mounting assassination attempts and large operations that hurt the Rhodesian government politically. One egregious case involved a raid in which unarmed guerrillas were shot as they stood in a parade formation and all the patients in the camp hospital were burned alive when Scout fire set the structure alight. The attack drew international condemnation, which was intensified by the fact that the camp was a registered UN refugee center.<sup>29</sup>

The Scouts had the material capability to launch these external operations but lacked the strategic understanding to recognize the political implications of their warfighting choices. In addition, their background and training meant they were not particularly concerned with the state-to-state relations important to Rhodesia. The Scouts focused on destroying the insurgency militarily.

### *Enfranchised Roles, Targeting, and Operations*

Evidence from Algeria and Dhofar supports the finding that defectors are more likely to serve counterinsurgent purposes when they provide input into their roles, targeting, and operational planning. In Algeria, the French formed a force of Harkis, who were Arab, Berber, or Muslim Algerian soldiers rather than French or French Algerian soldiers, made up of about 1,000 insurgent defectors, keeping each unit near its home community. The Harkis, reluctant to fight elsewhere due to fear for their families' safety, were more effective at hunting insurgents because they knew the operational areas well.<sup>30</sup> Similarly, in al-Anbar province, the US Army found former insurgents were more likely to join the Iraqi army if they were assigned to their home area.<sup>31</sup> In Dhofar, the *firqats'* insistence on seemingly endless talking over operational plans maddened the British regular officers, but commanders considered it was worth the cost because of the military and political gains enabled by the defectors.<sup>32</sup>

### *Organize, Train, and Support*

In Dhofar, El Salvador, and Iraq, the counterinsurgencies benefited by organizing, training, and fully supporting defectors' operations. The French failure to do so in Algeria had high costs.

In Dhofar, the SAS began with a determination that units of defectors would not be used simply as guides; they would be fighters, properly armed, trained, and supported.<sup>33</sup> The SAS trained the *firqats* in fire discipline, patrol formations, tactics, and maneuver, as well as operating as units with machine gun, mortar, artillery, and air support.<sup>34</sup> Extending the SAS role from training to accompanying the *firqats* in

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28 Cline, *Pseudo Operations*, 13.

29 Cline, *Pseudo Operations*, 12.

30 Cassidy, "Long Small War."

31 Smith and MacFarland, "Anbar Awakens."

32 Gardiner, *Service of the Sultan*, 157; and MG Ken Perkins (commander of the SAF 1975–77), interview with author, May 20, 2009.

33 Jeapes, *SAS*, 48.

34 Jeapes, email message to author, September 11, 2009.

the field made backing them with direct and indirect fires and air power possible. This presence also reduced high-level concerns about the possibility of the firqats returning to the other side, though at a cost.<sup>35</sup> The SAS men working with the firqats suffered a casualty rate as high as 30 percent.<sup>36</sup>

Local forces in Dhofar who were untrained, poorly armed, and unsupported were less reliable. Most could stand guard and little more. Some passed information to the insurgents.<sup>37</sup> The Oman Gendarmerie, who were guarding the fort at Mirbat when insurgents mounted an attack in July 1972, declined to assist the small number of SAS troops and other defenders repelling the onslaught.<sup>38</sup> In Algeria, the Harkis grew from 18 to 385 village forces, totaling about 60,000 fighters. Their effectiveness, however, varied significantly with the abilities of the French officers assigned as area administrators and responsible for training.<sup>39</sup>

Individual advisors in El Salvador created effective units in their area of operations even with limited institutional support. One highly effective unit of defectors was set up quietly, outside US Embassy oversight, and the troops were paid with Central Intelligence Agency money.<sup>40</sup> This unit was supported by the best troops the US advisors could find and train, Salvadoran special forces noncommissioned officers, who also ran the operations. The men got special uniforms and pay and were exempt from routine duties. The CIA provided a bounty for captured weapons that could be traced to the insurgency.<sup>41</sup>

Similarly, efforts to use the local militias, known as Awakening Councils, against al-Qaeda in Baghdad, Iraq, were more effective when US troops not only worked closely with militia commanders but also when operations included militias, Iraqi army troops, and US soldiers together. Complaints about Iraqi and militia intimidation of civilians and criminal behavior dropped significantly under these conditions, a positive indicator as the United States sought popular support for the counterinsurgency.<sup>42</sup>

Military support for the Iraqi militias was also important in increasing their effectiveness. When residents of the Baghdad neighborhood of Amiriya decided to challenge al-Qaeda, they faced a hard fight. The Americans held their fire against the militia when it initiated action and later sent in two Stryker platoons to stop the insurgents' advance against the militia members hard-pressed in their strongholds.<sup>43</sup> On an earlier occasion, US forces quickly blocked an al-Qaeda attack on a tribe in Anbar that had begun challenging its control the area.<sup>44</sup> These US choices

35 Jeapes, *SAS*, 48.

36 Jeapes, interview. For context, the casualty rate for British Commonwealth troops in World War II was nearly 11 percent. Thomas Harding and Graeme Wilson, "Afghan Casualty Rate 'at Level of Last War,'" *Telegraph*, July 16, 2007.

37 Captured Enemy Documents—Third National Congress of Rakyut June 1971, December 15, 1971, Graham, OA Box 2, Folder 5, MEC, SAC, Oxford.

38 Interview recording, anonymous, October 23, 1992, catalog number 11161, reel 1, IMW.

39 Cassidy, "Long Small War."

40 Pedrozo, emails.

41 Ibid.

42 LTC Dale Kuehl, "Testing Galula in Ameriyah: The People Are the Key," *Military Review* 89, no. 2 (March–April 2009): 72–80.

43 Kuehl, "Testing Galula."

44 Smith and MacFarland, "Anbar Awakens."

prevented the slaughter of new allies and demonstrated commitment and a willingness to bear the costs of keeping the partnership.

US forces in Iraq also found that paying, equipping, and training tribal forces was worth the cost. Recruits accepted for training in the Iraqi police received a payment, and officers who stayed with the police force for more than three months received a bonus. Training included urban combat to build the coalition's small-unit effectiveness.<sup>45</sup> Violence dropped significantly in Anbar once US forces reached a *modus vivendi* with the tribes.<sup>46</sup>

### *Cooperation within Conventional Forces*

In Dhofar and Iraq, defectors were better able to support insurgent goals when main force troops and officers recognized the value of their efforts and demonstrated a willingness to cooperate operationally. Evidence from Algeria, Rhodesia, and El Salvador is insufficient for affirming a lack of coordination and distrust between irregular and regular units can lead to bad outcomes such as friendly fire episodes.<sup>47</sup>

The campaign in Dhofar was based on more extensive use of the firqats. The strategy was to fight for and hold territory in the eastern sector of Dhofar and then the central area. The counterinsurgency targeted areas of weaker support for the insurgency, held the territory, and eventually pushed insurgents into the more thinly populated west to destroy them adjacent to their safe haven in Yemen. The firqats were integral to the plan. They scouted and skirmished, gained targeting information from friends and family in their home areas, helped the Sultan's army take new territory, and then held it with the SAS.

The firqats routinely coordinated with the counterinsurgents in operations from clearing to eliminating insurgent mortar positions and searching for arms caches.<sup>48</sup> The regular officers found trusting the firqats difficult, and the risk of friendly fire was high because the firqats looked and dressed like the insurgents.<sup>49</sup> But, when the SAF shunned the defectors, operations were less successful. Near the end of the war, one regimental commander refused to work with firqats. Without their intelligence, he could not locate the last remaining insurgents in the cleared eastern area. The SAS was reassigned to the area, reestablished its relationship with the firqats, and began getting the information the Sultan's Armed Forces needed to remove the remaining insurgents.<sup>50</sup>

The SAF complained that the firqats were in touch with the enemy, but that was part of the point: the firqats were getting information and trying to win over more defectors.<sup>51</sup> The militias were also unpredictable, and thus frustrating, to regular forces accustomed to orderly, hierarchical behavior. The defectors were eager to attack, would jump into a flurry

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45 Ibid.

46 Austin Long, "The Anbar Awakening," *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy* 50, no. 2 (April-May 2008): 67–94, doi:10.1080/00396330802034283.

47 Gardiner, *Service of the Sultan*, 157; and Perkins, interview.

48 Gardiner, *Service of the Sultan*, 140–41; "Notes on Visit to Oman," COL W. J. Reed, Ministry of Defence DEFE 25/312, The National Archives of the United Kingdom (TNA), Kew, UK; Akehurst, *We Won a War*, 77; and Jeapes, *SAS* 190–91.

49 Gardiner, *Service of the Sultan*, 157; and Perkins, interview.

50 Jeapes, interview.

51 Jeapes, *SAS*, 76.

of activity to arrange an operation, then change their minds.<sup>52</sup> But, the SAS, with a background in working with non-European troops and in irregular warfare could recognize the *firqats*' strengths and be patient, as well as interface with the SAF to facilitate cooperation.<sup>53</sup>

In Iraq, the United States was also apprehensive about cooperating with militias and about letting former insurgents into the security forces. These concerns were allayed in part by educational efforts pressed by a few US officers. US troops supporting the Awakening educated coalition forces on the intelligence and local knowledge defectors could offer. American soldiers also emphasized the increasing alignment of interests between Sunni fighters and the United States.<sup>54</sup>

### *Aligning Interests*

Effectively using defectors as fighting forces requires the counterinsurgency to recognize, and strengthen, aligned interests, which need not be identical.<sup>55</sup> Recognizing intersecting or overlapping interests requires the counterinsurgency to prioritize its own goals. The campaign in Dhofar and the early efforts in Iraq support this element, while evidence from Algeria and a later period in Iraq show the costs of not seeking or cementing aligned interests.

In Dhofar, the SAS leaders who formed the *firqats* around defectors were bitterly disappointed that the units had to be structured around tribal relationships when they had hoped for a pantribal force based on their own liberal values. But the first-formed *firqat* had to be broken up because of intertribal squabbling.<sup>56</sup>

Conversely, the effectiveness of the tribally based *firqats* was exceptional precisely because of their tribal affiliations. Each unit operated with their SAS handlers in their own tribal area, refused to participate in any operation that did not directly benefit them, and refused to cross tribal boundaries in the mountains, where the insurgency was strongest. Their stubbornness infuriated the British officers leading the Sultan's campaign, but it paid off.<sup>57</sup> The *firqats* influenced cousins and brothers with the insurgency, when they considered it in their interest to do so, and collected information from them.<sup>58</sup> The *firqats* warned

52 Jeapes, *SAS*, 88.

53 Jeapes, interview; Perkins, interview; and MAJ Ian Gordon (former British officer who served with SAF), interview with author, May 17, 2009. Thomas R. Mockaitis, makes a similar point about the British imperial experience with non-European troops in *British Counterinsurgency in the Post-Imperial Era* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1995), 93. For more on the SAS experience with unconventional warfare, see Walter C. Ladwig III, "Supporting Allies in Counterinsurgency: Britain and the Dhofar Rebellion," *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 19, no. 1 (March 2008): 62–88, doi:10.1080/09592310801905793.

54 Smith and MacFarland, "Anbar Awakens."

55 Stephen M. Walt, "Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power," *International Security* 9, no. 4 (Spring 1985): 3–43, doi:10.2307/2538540.

56 Jeapes, interview; and Perkins, interview.

57 Gardiner, *Service of the Sultan*, 157; and Perkins, interview.

58 Perkins, interview; Jeapes, *SAS*, 78; Akehurst catalog number 11156, reel 2, IWM; Jeapes, interview; R. A. Lloyd Jones to A. A. Acland, July 1, 1971, DEFE 24/1835, TNA; D.F. Hawley, October 16, 1972, DEFE 25/294, TNA; Sitrep, December 19, 1972, DEFE 25/368, TNA; Review of the Military Situation Since the 10th December 1973 to the 23rd January 1974, Commander Sultan's Armed Forces MG Timothy Creasey, DEFE 25/312, TNA; The Principles Governing Military Assistance to Oman, DEFE 25/315, TNA; Civil Administration in Dhofar, Oman, November 4, 1974, Foreign & Commonwealth Office (FCO) 8/2216, TNA; and Report Commander Sultan's Armed Forces to Chiefs of Staff 28 December 1975, DEFE 11/899, TNA.

their families that enemy activity near the outposts would mean no more water in the harsh terrain.<sup>59</sup> These outposts also made patrolling deep into insurgent territory and expanding the network of tracks in the mountains possible, which also increased military access to the region.<sup>60</sup>

The firqats safeguarded the interests of their friends and family as well as their own. One day, mountain herders brought 1,400 goats to an outpost. The firqats told their SAS handlers that they would not go on any more operations if the military did not buy the goats. Dhofar's governor recognized a test when he heard one. He had the goats flown down to the plain and purchased.<sup>61</sup>

In Dhofar, the firqats made sure their interests were known and met in other ways as well. The firqats were paid regular wages, plus bonuses for captured enemy weapons.<sup>62</sup> Providing employment for and feeding the families of fighting-age men made the firqats an expensive insurance policy for the sultan that continued after the conflict in the form of bounties for insurgents' weapons and ammunition.<sup>63</sup> Between August 1974 and August 1976 alone, Sultan Qaboos bin Said paid out nearly a million pounds.<sup>64</sup> When the conflict was winding down, the firqats feared for their livelihood. Their SAS handlers noticed that once the firqats' future was assured, the insurgents lurking in the valleys faded away.<sup>65</sup> The firqats were becoming warlords, but the government remained stable. By conflict's end, the firqat leaders controlled all activity in their areas, including the grazing and watering of livestock and the sale of state food, while staying busy conducting political affairs in Dhofar's capital city, Salalah, without challenging the sultan.<sup>66</sup>

In Anbar, when powerful Sunni tribes stopped fighting the United States and allied with it against the new dominant local power, al-Qaeda, then-Colonel Sean B. MacFarland put aside concerns about criminal activity and potential fickleness on the part of the provinces' political leaders. He focused instead on getting what he needed from them as intelligence sources and fighters. "You don't get to be a sheik by being a nice guy. These guys are ruthless characters," MacFarland said. "That doesn't mean they can't be reliable partners."<sup>67</sup>

In Algeria, the French often used force and the threat of force, including torture and threats against their families, to gain the cooperation of defectors.<sup>68</sup> The French suffered a major setback with Force K, a Muslim Algerian guerrilla force. Force K turned out to consist largely of insurgents and men who became insurgents after joining. Once the deception was discovered, some 600 members of the 1,000-man force escaped to the insurgency with their weapons and equipment.<sup>69</sup>

59 Akehurst, August, 13, 2004, catalog number 27184, reel 24, IMW.

60 Akehurst, *We Won a War*, 77–78.

61 Jeapes, *SAS*, 139–40.

62 Jeapes, *SAS*, 59.

63 Akehurst, catalog number 27184, reel 24, IMW.

64 Akehurst, *We Won a War*, 178.

65 Jeapes, interview.

66 Jeapes, *SAS*, 163.

67 John A. McCary, "The Anbar Awakening: An Alliance of Incentives," *Washington Quarterly* 32, no. 1 (January 2009): 43–59, doi:10.1080/01636600802544905.

68 Cline, *Pseudo Operations*, 7.

69 Cline, *Pseudo Operations*, 8.

In El Salvador, the counterinsurgency had success with its few attempts to use defectors as fighters. This application may have been limited because there was little alignment of interests between members of the insurgency and the government. Many of the insurgents who defected, including those who surrendered after increased combat operations dislocated large numbers of civilians, did so out of war weariness.<sup>70</sup> In addition, many defectors were from areas with relatively weak devotion to the insurgency.<sup>71</sup>

In Iraq, a key shared interest between the United States and the sheiks of the Anbar Awakening, which had mixed success, was keeping the tribal leaders alive. US forces supported and backed tribal operations against al-Qaeda, and provided security for the sheiks and their families. Further, the Americans acknowledged the status of the sheiks by incorporating them into governance structures. When Sheikh Abdul Sattar Bezia al-Rishawi of the Abu Risha tribe led a campaign against al-Qaeda, the United States provided security for him, made him the counterinsurgency coordinator for Anbar, deputized his militias, and accepted his tribesmen into the Iraqi Police. Similarly, the tribesmen of the Abu Mahal tribe came to dominate the Iraqi Army brigade in their area.<sup>72</sup>

The costs to the counterinsurgency of not seeking to align some interests with defectors and potential defectors can be high. In Iraq, the danger of not finding a way to keep defectors' interests aligned with those of the government quickly became evident. The United States initially paid salaries to Awakening members with the expectation that the Iraqi government would take over in the longer term, providing jobs that would keep the former insurgents aligned with the government.

After the US drawdown, this *modus vivendi* fractured. The Iraqi government hired half or fewer of the fighters, and many of those hired received menial work rather than positions in the security forces. A number of defectors returned to fighting the government by aligning with al-Qaeda, for pay, to avoid attack, or both. Nathum al-Jubouri, a former Awakening Council leader in Salahuddin province, explained the group's uncertainty about "what the government intends for them."<sup>73</sup> Ultimately, a number of former insurgents and former defectors joined forces with al-Qaeda's successor organization, the Islamic State, and have continued fighting the government and allied foreign forces.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

This article has shown that counterinsurgencies get the most out of using defectors as fighters when that use supports the fighters' unique skills and meets their interests.

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70 Luis Orlando Rodriguez (government employee, served at US Southern Command 1981–83; evaluated and advised the El Salvador Armed Forces in Usulután in the wake of the critical Woerner Report of 1981; senior member Operational and Planning Training Team 1983–88), interview with author, April 21, 2010; and John D. Waghelstein, *El Salvador: Observations and Experiences in Counterinsurgency*, Individual Study Project (Carlisle Barracks, PA: US Army War College, 1985), 63, 67, Senior Officer Oral History Program, OCLC 24438418, US Army Heritage and Education Center (AHEC), Carlisle, PA.

71 Waghelstein, *El Salvador*.

72 Long, "The Anbar Awakening."

73 Timothy Williams and Duraid Adnan, "Sunnis in Iraq Allied with U.S. Rejoin Rebels," *New York Times*, October 16, 2010.

In the successful campaigns in Dhofar, El Salvador, and Iraq, counterinsurgents used defectors' unique skills for operational success. In Dhofar, the counterinsurgency also used the *firqats* for strategic success. These warlords remain in power and contribute to Oman's long-term political stability because the government continues to protect their interests. In Dhofar and Iraq, counterinsurgents also gave defectors a say in planning operations. In all three successes, defector units were properly trained and supported and conventional forces cooperated with them at the tactical and operational levels. In the two cases of failure, there is limited evidence that counterinsurgents used defectors' unique skills, gave them a say, properly supported and cooperated with them, and met their interests. Further research should determine not only more about use of defectors in these cases but also examine additional cases.

These findings, while constrained by the limits of the information available, suggest a counterinsurgency should prioritize its interests to get the best out of defectors. Its need to defeat the insurgency should be balanced with its desire to limit the creation of alternate power centers within the state as well as any hope to retain the moral high ground by refusing to cooperate with brutal actors. Further, the counterinsurgency should make an effort to identify and to take advantage of strategically overlapping interests, such as material rewards or status, with some of those valued by insurgents.

The counterinsurgency should try to recognize when fissures develop within the insurgency and seize those opportunities to create incentives for partnership, rather than considering the insurgency as a unitary actor with diametrically opposed interests to those of the government. Counterinsurgents should recognize that insurgent leaders who can, and will, bring their followers with them when they defect are more valuable than individual defectors. The counterinsurgency should identify and act upon ways to cement its alignment of interests with defectors in the longer term as well as identify and use defectors' most important skills for the tasks at hand. This process includes bringing defectors' knowledge and insights into the planning and targeting process and using them in cooperation and coordination with conventional forces. The counterinsurgency should apply the necessary resources to train, equip, and support defectors properly, which includes assigning task trainers, handlers, and leaders experienced in irregular warfare and with non-Western fighters. Effective use of defectors as fighting forces is not determinative in counterinsurgency, as far as this study can tell, but it does provide governments and foreign forces with support in areas where they are likely to be weakest.

